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ABSTRACT

This paper considers, from a British perspective, organizational theory as it applies to colleges, and provides theoretical background for people involved in curriculum-led institutional development, as well as anyone concerned with college organization. Among the topics discussed are the following: (1) institutional resistance to change; (2) the organizational structure and its relation to the product or service of the school as well as the college sub-systems; (3) the problem of the demands of specialization versus concern for the organization as a whole; and (4) the many diverse interests and relationships that exist with the institution that are encountered among its members. Also discussed is the need to control the institutional environment when change is sought but some measure of stability is still desired. The last sections involve an examination of facilitating change when change is unavoidable, as well as the factors that are key to the success or failure of the curriculum or course innovations; and the question of how far the college can be structured and operated to facilitate the curriculum process. Contains 27 references. (GLR)

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Responding to change: the need for flexible college structures and practices

C M Turner

The Staff College

MP 005

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Mendip Papers

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Introduction

This paper considers organisational theory as it applies to colleges. It was written in order to provide a theoretical background for people involved in curriculum-led institutional development but has relevance to anyone concerned with college organisation.

Resistance to change

There are many ways in which institutions can be structured and operated, and the reasons why any particular college is the way it is may be a consequence of decisions and influences that are no longer relevant or valid. If we accept that there are a number of alternatives open to a college, then it seems reasonable to suggest a regular review of its organisational structure and operating system. Some colleges might argue that the options open to them are in fact very limited. The only natural way to organise a college might seem to be by department and hierarchy, and even if this is not the case, once a college is so organised it is difficult to move far away from that situation .

This argument deserves some consideration. It exemplifies a principle of organisation theory - that organisations tend to make minimal change, and work to keep a stable state and a predictable operation (Turner 1975). This tendency is reinforced in a number of ways. The operating procedures of the college through its rules and regulations work on the basis that things will stay much the same, and it is therefore possible to create

maximum order and predictability by running as much of the organisation as possible in a routine manner.

A second factor that works for the stable state organisation lies in the relationship of staff to the institution. Most staff are likely to have a vested interest in keeping things more or less the same. The process of socialisation into the work role is very powerful, and locks the member into a complex network of organisational relationships, behaviour and attitudes. The ritual processes of the college tie the individual member by bonds of affiliation and shared perceptions. Members individually negotiate or work out a role for themselves that they find satisfactory, and then surround that role with reinforcers and defences so that it is protected from unwanted change. All staff have investments to protect and, unless change can be seen by any of them to be a clear improvement of their own role and status, then they are likely to resist it (Turner 1980 and 1990a).

It can be argued that a prime demand of most staff is that of predictability - the expectation that each day is not going to be significantly different from the previous one, and they can get on with their job without having to wonder what is going to change next. This is not to deny that some staff members look for change and flourish in risk-taking and unpredictable situations. The more common response, however, is likely to be towards minimum change strategies reinforcing a stable state.

There is considerable evidence that if staff members feel threatened (whether the threat is real or not), and particularly if the threat comes from outside the college, they will encourage the intensification of control systems and organisational routines and the strengthening of college boundaries, and try to run a very tight ship.

Colleges have faced a succession of challenging curriculum changes from the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) and the Training Agency (TA - now incorporated within the Department of Employment). At the same time financial support has been cut, the role of the local education authority attenuated, colleges amalgamated or closed, departments run down, and staff faced with redundancy or early retirement. It is not surprising if their response is close to that which is postulated as typical under perceptions of threat (Turner 1990b).

Organisational structure and the product or service

Operating in a minimal change strategy may be at the expense of the product or service for which the organisation exists. All institutions have a prime legitimising purpose for existing - to make plastic buckets for example, or provide theatrical performances or move people by ship from one place to another. The prime purpose of the college is to provide structured learning experiences for students. Organisation theory also states that the organisation of an institution should relate to the nature of its product or service. This is known as the socio-technical approach (Woodward 1968).

There are two problems that merit discussion. Firstly there is the question of how far the technology of production determines the organisation of the institution. That it should do so to a considerable extent is not really at issue. There are classic studies of coal-mining, small batch production and the fashion industry among others, which demonstrate how the organisation needs to reflect the nature of the production process. There are some equally significant studies which show how institutions totally failed to do this, and all sorts of expedients had to be used to make the system work (Roy 1969). Of course a college can be organised totally on the basis of the requirements of structuring the learning of students. However the organisational structure and the technology of production (whether product or service) should substantially be in harmony and not working against each other.

A second debate relating to the socio-technical approach is the extent to which one structure can satisfy equally all the demands that are generated in the process of producing goods or providing services. There are legitimate conflicts within organisations between different sections - for example those responsible for acquiring and stocking raw materials, those responsible for production lines, and those responsible for marketing and selling. There may also be conflicts between demands from different types of product. If we transfer this to the college, we can visualise conflict between Training Agency, GCSE and A level courses and BTEC courses over the most appropriate college structure and organisation.

Organisational structure and the college sub-systems

There are many interests to accommodate within an organisation and it is not simply a question of conflict within the area of production or service. All institutions operate as systems with inter-connected sub-systems. Although there is much academic debate about the validity of systems theory, there is general acceptance that an institution such as a college can be conceived as a system with a number of interlocking sub-systems (Turner 1972). Those managing the college must give proper attention to all sub-systems because what happens in one of them affects all the others.

The sub-system of production or process is concerned with transforming materials or people in some way. In the case of the college it is concerned with the process of taking in students and providing them with structured learning experiences so that they leave with changed attitudes, new skills and new information. Another sub-system is concerned with maintenance. This involves keeping the institution ticking over in good shape through attention to physical plant, administrative routines, financial systems and the like. It is also concerned with developing an efficient and effective staff sufficiently committed to the institution to remain in it and work with some enthusiasm. A third sub-system concerns the relationship of the college to its environment, and involves power and influence relations with key agencies such as the local education authority, and the establishment and maintenance of public reputation.

There are other sub-systems, but the point is sufficiently made that if we pay too much attention to any one sub-system then the whole institution is likely to suffer. While it is reasonable, therefore, to argue that the college should be structured and organised to give maximum help to the student as a learner, this cannot be the sole determinant of structure and organisation. Reasonable motivation and satisfaction of staff, adequate administrative and financial control, negotiated positions with local industry and public reputation are some of the other key concerns for the manager. Satisfying all of them may require modification of the optimal organisation structure for the provision of learning for students. The curriculum cannot be the sole determinant of institutional development.

Integration versus differentiation

A problem faced by most organisations is the conflict between the demands of specialisation on the one hand, and a concern for the organisation as a whole on the other. This is generally referred to as integration versus differentiation. Specialist units tend to increase in organisations over time (Katz and Kahn 1966). To an extent such units inevitably become separate and independent from other parts of the organisation, and acquire a status and power of their own. Provided that there is a high degree of inter-dependency of the units, then overall task efficiency seems related both to high differentiation of the units and high integration across the organisation (Lawrence and Lorsh 1967 and Lorsh and Lawrence 1970). Facilitating two such antagonistic organisational qualities is one of the dilemmas with which management is faced. Their aim is to encourage specialist units to develop their own unique mode of interaction with their particular external environment, but to balance that against powerful intra-organisation integrative devices.

There can be little doubt that college courses have become more inter-dependent as a result of modular structures and curricula which cut across traditional subjects and departments. There is also an indirect inter-dependency in colleges that arises from the nature of a teaching institution and which does not exist in all organisations. All courses have potential learning experience for all other courses. The methodology or technology of teaching on one course, e.g. a higher technician course, may have relevance to a course in basic skills. These washover effects make it difficult to treat the college as consisting of autonomous units that need not have much relation to each other. An example of this dilemma was provision for the young unemployed. This provision can form a separate unit which is placed in a geographically distant annexe, thus emphasising specialisation and differentiation, or the work can be spread between different departments with a co-ordinator to tie it together, thus emphasising integration.

Areas of interest

The college is made up of individuals who have negotiated their own position and have their own

individual perception of the institution. No two people see it in quite the same way. Each person has a unique relationship to the institution and the various members of it (Greenfield 1979). The organisation is a social construct: its reality consists of the meanings each individual gives to it.

Members of institutions, it has been argued, operate in three separate areas of interest (Burns 1969). The first of these concerns the professional area of their work. Within this area they make decisions and form attitudes and opinions which reflect their concern with their professional competence as teachers and as people skilled in their subject discipline. A second area concerns the political system of the institution. Within this, individuals seek to exercise power and influence in relation to others. Within a third area of interest, individuals act to enhance their career inside or outside the institution. On occasions, the same action may be located in all three areas, for they clearly overlap, but in many cases it will be specific to one of the three areas. Curriculum-led institutional development, or any other approach based on the socio-technical model, has to operate in this context and can clearly be sabotaged by it.

We can extend the context of the three areas of interest from the individual to the institution as a whole. The college has a concern with its professional mission of student learning, and many would argue that this is its prime concern. However, the college operates in a political environment, and needs to devote energy to develop influences in appropriate places. The college is also clearly concerned about its future development; its growing or declining prestige; or its acquisition or loss of academic reputation in relation to other colleges in its area.

At the college level, as is the case with the individual, these three areas of interest overlap. Managers will seek to operate wherever possible in such common areas, but there will be occasions where actions are relevant only to one area, and if not antagonistic to the other two areas, at least are taking energy away from them. It would be unrealistic to pretend that the demands of these three areas of interest are not in conflict.

Controlling the environment of the college

For an institution which has a strong drive to make as little change and preserve as much stability as possible (though there may be countervailing thrusts as well), control of the relevant environment outside the boundary becomes critical. Although institutions may make the assumption that they live in placid and benevolent environments, this is unlikely to be true. Institutions usually exist in turbulent environments. There has been much attention given to the interaction of the institution and its environment by organisation theorists (Turner 1975 and Terreberry 1967).

A particular concern has been the way in which institutions try to get control over parts of the environment they define as relevant. The various strategies are explored by Thompson and his followers, and include getting control over sources of raw materials, buying up outlets, influencing consumer choice, buying political influence, alliances with rivals etc. (Thompson 1967).

In the case of the college, control of the environment has been mostly exercised by student and course selection. Since the college can respond, as part of its stated purpose, to almost any part of the environment, it is able to make choices about which parts it relates to and which parts it avoids. Although colleges would claim they respond to local and industrial needs, it is obvious that they can only respond to some of those needs. The selection can be based on many criteria, but commonly result in minimising change and seeking out placid parts of the environment, rather than high levels of change from unpredictable parts. Selection will then reinforce the existing structure and organisation of a college rather than challenge it.

The problem for the college is amplified if control over boundary transaction is lost. This happens if outside curriculum agencies enforce unwanted changes. Although there are likely to be strong defensive attempts to redefine the new situation as very little different from the old, as happened frequently in the case of the BTEC and many Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) courses, the power to do that may be permanently diminished, and this is the particular significance of the Training and Enterprise Councils' (TEC) proposals with an industry-based, multi-

agency approach that has overtones of an Illich-type deinstitutionalisation.

A response by colleges to this kind of situation has frequently been to strengthen boundaries, emphasise other types of work over which institutional control is high, and insofar as commitment to non-controlled work is unavoidable, to separate it off from the rest of the college. If our focus is on the capacity of the institution to bring into harmony the demands of its provision of service with the structure of the organisation, then boundary interaction and boundary control is a critical complication.

Facilitating change

Everything we have said so far has emphasised the tendency in institutions to resist change but where change is inevitable to control it in such a way that the traditional customs of management, structure and operating procedures are not altered. However, an institution which bases its operations and systems on the requirements derived from its product or service will always require an adaptive capacity, and some types of institution will require a high capacity for constant change.

This is a disturbing fact for institutions which have encouraged the forces of stability and predictability. The college falls into this category. The volatility and reactive dynamics of the student-teacher learning process, and the regular changes in curriculum required by outside agencies, require a college to have the capacity for constant and rapid change. This is particularly the case when these two forces combine in a student-centred curriculum approach that is explicit in TVEI and TEC courses, and is implicit in some of the curriculum statements of BTEC. (It has always been the model for adult community education and education for special needs, which is why these two areas of activity, if in the college at all, tend to be isolated from mainstream activity.)

Much of the work on change, particularly in relation to the introduction of new curricula, has made assumptions about the rationality of organisations that is not based in reality. Models of change are predicated on a world that does not exist (Challis and Russell 1984). Change has to be related to the whole of the complex processes going on between individuals in the college, and too little of the literature on change concentrates on that. There have been some helpful lines of thinking, so far as they go. A number of writers have worked on the concept of organisational health. Their argument is that change will always be painful if the institution has major weaknesses in its management, structure and operational systems. The best strategy for introducing change is therefore to get the organisation into reasonable health in such areas as power equity or communication systems (Miles 1969).

Another line which might have useful application is the work on strategies of timing in the change process - what has to be completed before the next stage is started. A third approach has been to identify all the factors encouraging and inhibiting change, so that energy and resources can be switched to the change-facilitating parts of the institution, and change-inhibitors can either be isolated from the rest of the organisation or reduced in power and influence. The general lesson seems to be that if an institution by the nature of its work needs to make frequent changes then its structure and operating systems need to be change-facilitating rather than change-resistant (Gross *et al* 1971 and Johns 1973).

Innovation is a process within an existing political, social and organisational context, and each innovation experience is unique to that college at that time. Within the limitations laid down by this assumption, it is possible to suggest some factors which are likely to be decisive in the success or failure of a curriculum or course innovation. We can draw on field research from colleges and universities in the USA (Lindquist 1978), Sweden (Berg and Ostergren 1977) and Britain (Mathias and Rutherford 1983, Hewton 1982) which were concerned with curriculum and course innovation and evaluation. From these we can derive the following list of key factors in the success or failure of the various projects:

1. **Power**
   This generally seems to be the most important. Unless a project is backed by institutional power then its success is likely to be superficial and transient (Eraut 1975 and Goldschmid 1978). In terms of the further education college this suggests that unless the principal places his authority behind a project it is likely to be in trouble.

2. **Leadership**
   The biggest resource drain is that of time,

and the greatest need of time is from the leader of innovation who can provide support and facilitation of various kinds. How such a leader can be identified, supported and rewarded is a major problem for further education colleges.

3. **Ownership**
   The more the project is owned by participants as 'theirs' the higher their commitment to its success. The greater the number of people who feel they have an ownership stake in the project the more powerful the forces behind it. Ideally a major curriculum project in a further education college should be owned by the management team and the academic board, as well as the teachers involved in it. The success of, for example, the college's full-cost recovery courses for industry might in the end mean the success of the total college.

4. **Gain/loss**
   Individuals, from their various perspectives, will calculate whether they gain from an innovation, either materially or, more probably, psychologically. If they do not, they will not be anxious for its success. In a situation of contracting resources and slow or nil growth, colleges are likely to be rewarding staff less through promotions, and more through status and acknowledgement of the centrality of the innovation. Rewards may well, however, be those of personal satisfaction of self realisation, which **Innovation and innovation processes in higher education** (Berg and Ostergren 1977) put on an equal footing with security and stability as the concern of staff.

5. **Openness**
   Innovations flourish to the degree that there is a willingness actively to seek out new ideas, new information and new approaches from beyond the resources of the immediate primary group. Thus the extent to which an innovation group in a college makes itself open to ideas and information from the remaining staff in the college, from other colleges in the area, and indeed from any other sources they can identify is important for the ultimate success of the innovation.

6. **Linkage**
   This is the bringing together of people from across organisational boundaries and with very different experience and perspectives to work together on new ideas and information. Both parts of the process are important - the linkage of people who do not normally work together, and the presentation of information and problems in a way that is not typical within each separate section of the organisation. The extent to which these two conditions are satisfied when further education colleges set up curriculum working parties may well determine the degree of their success.

The usefulness of this work is that it is embedded firmly in the political context of the college and treats each curriculum innovation as unique, but identifies some processes which will occur one way or the other. Power, for example, is always an issue, whether on a particular occasion the innovation is typified by lack of appropriate power or not - the same is true of the other five processes.

Towards a college structure for curriculum-led institutional development

The key question, therefore, is how far the college can be structured and operated to facilitate the curriculum process. What structures and operating systems encourage an adaptive and change-seeking institution? The literature on organisation seems agreed that innovation and constant adaptation occur best in highly-flexible, participative, loose and untidy structures and least well in departmentalised, hierarchic, tight and well-organised structures. There has been no great enthusiasm for colleges organised along the former lines. Colleges are, to a greater or lesser extent, highly structured, departmentalised, hierarchic, tight and well- organised. They can adapt within the limits they themselves have laid down, and react to the environment across their boundary along routes which are well established and within customary selection and control systems. Colleges are not particularly participative or open. Responsibilities and duties are clearly laid down and related to hierarchic position and pay grading - staff are clear about *to* whom and *for* whom they

are responsible. Much of their work, particularly that which takes place in the classroom, has not customarily been open to observation and discussion by their peers, or even by their superordinates.

The college has erected an organisational palace when what it needed was a tent. The image comes from a seminal article by Hedberg, Nystrom and Starbuck published in 1976 (Hedberg *et al* 1976). A palace is not a temporary structure: it is there for good. It incorporates all the virtues of permanence and solidity. In the organisational palace, staff have clear job specifications, unambiguous tasks and agreed roles; communication channels are clear; decision-making is based on clear criteria; development is on the basis of agreed objectives; status is established in a hierarchy and related to a clear career progression enshrined in national agreements on pay and conditions of service. The task of developing an organisation led by the needs of the curriculum is to evict staff from the palace and provide them with organisational tents which can be erected, taken down and moved to other places at short notice with little bother.

It is worth quoting from Hedberg and his colleagues:

> An organisational tent places greater emphasis on flexibility, creativity, immediacy and initiative than on authority, clarity, decisiveness or responsiveness; and an organisational tent neither asks for harmony between the activities of different organisation components nor asks that today's behaviour resemble yesterday's or tomorrow's. An organisational tent actually exploits benefits hidden within properties that designers have generally regarded as liabilities. Ambiguous authority structures, unclear objectives, and contradictory assignments of responsibility can legitimate controversies and challenge traditions. Incoherence and indecision can foster exploration, self-evaluation and learning. Redundant task allocations can provide experimental replications, and partial incongruities can diversify portfolios of activities. (Hedberg *et al* 1976)

It is argued that organisational tents survive in rapidly changing circumstances because they put energy into scanning the environment to alert them to significant events, they ceaselessly question their present assumptions and habits, they discard old methods in order to try new ones.

> They hear descriptions of what exists as statements about the past, and fantasies about what might happen as opportunities to create reality. (Hedberg *et al* 1976)

Above all they regard the organisation as a means, not an end.

The concept of organisational anarchy has some parallels with the work of Hedberg and his colleagues (Cohen *et al* 1972 , and Turner and Packwood 1988). Some institutions were seen by Hedberg to be basically anarchic in their nature, such that they could not naturally follow the rules and behaviours that guided actions in rational or bureaucratic bodies. Three key characteristics of the anarchic organisation were identified. Firstly, the institution was unclear about what it was trying to do, and insofar as clear goals were established, these were disputed by the members. Secondly, there were uncertainties about how the central process of the institution actually worked, and what courses actually effected the desired changes. Thirdly, it was unclear who was a member of the institution and who was not. These three characteristics were labelled: problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid membership.

It can be argued that the college substantially fills all three criteria, and could therefore be better organised on that assumption than as a Weberian-type rational bureaucracy. The implications are much the same as setting up an organisational tent rather than a palace.

All this leaves us with a dilemma. On the one hand, if colleges are to be curriculum-led in their organisation development, and if their primary responses are to be derived from the nature of student learning, they will mostly need to be highly-flexible, adaptive, provisional bodies. On the other hand, the generality of colleges as they exist are rooted in past traditions and customary practice; they are relatively inflexible, static and permanent bodies, and have considerable investments in preserving that stable state. Management that is based on curriculum-led institutional organisation needs to be centrally concerned with making what shifts are practicable whenever the occasion presents itself, from one state to another. It is therefore concerned to encourage the following kinds of thinking:

- short-run decision-making with an assumption that no solution lasts for very long;

- intensive scanning of the environment so that early warning information can enable the college to adapt quickly to new demands;

- massive availability of information at all levels of the institution which is not restricted to traditional communication channels;

- provisional structures rather than permanent ones, in relation to personal tasks, departmental formation and task groups - in particular the use of temporary task teams, and rotating jobs;

- lowering of boundary defences so that the college is less split off as a separate body from its environment, and is less selective and in control of those parts of the outside world with which it has dealings;

- control of action and high levels of autonomy residing with those staff who are the first-time response to environmental demand;

- high levels of participation by staff in the running of the institution and its parts, and conversely low levels of bureaucratic or hierarchic control;

- the encouragement of risk-taking at all levels of the college;

- finally, an organisational structure which facilitates all of the above.

At the very least, this will mean a modification of the departmental hierarchic system prevalent in colleges, and will generally mean some form of collegial matrix.

Of course, a college may properly make the decision that such an adaptive structure is not appropriate for the kind of work it has. A reasonable foresight about impending curricula changes, however, suggests that for most colleges a substantial change is required to develop a system that works with rather than against such changes.

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MP 003	**Contracting with PCFC institutions**	R J Kedney & M C Fletcher	£3.00
MP 004	**Management staff ratios and unit costs**	R J Kedney	£3.00
MP 005	**Responding to change: the need for flexible college structures and practices**	C M Turner	£2.50
MP 006	**Socialisation into organisations**	C M Turner	£2.50
MP 007	**Organisational culture**	C M Turner	£4.50
MP 008	**The perception of threat and the reality of decline in organisations**	C M Turner	£3.50
MP 009	**The National Quality Survey**	E Sallis	£4.50
MP 010	**Performance indicators and adult education**	B E Foster	£4.50
MP 011	**Essential acronyms in further, higher and adult education**	J A Graystone	£2.50
MP 012	**Performance review: current practices and prospects**	T G Melling	£2.50
MP 013	**The role of the new vice-principal**	C Megson	£3.50
MP 014	**New governing bodies in maintained FE: size and composition**	J A Graystone	£5.00
MP 015	**Structures - fact and fiction**	C M Turner	£5.00
MP 016	**Education reform legislation in the UK: a summary**	J A Graystone	£4.00
MP 017	**Cost centres and college budgets post-ERA**	P Crisp, A Nightingale & H Street	£4.00
MP 018	**Effective meetings**	J A Graystone	£3.00
MP 019	**Solving the problem of mathematics**	Sir Roy Harding CBE	£2.50
MP 020	**College quality assurance systems**	E Sallis & P Hingley	£5.50
MP 021	**Accommodation planning - one poly's experience**	M Murphy	£5.00

Further titles will cover the following topics: managing motivation, inter-personal skills, student services, marketing, staff appraisal, and personnel management. Titles will be added continually to cover the whole spectrum of further and higher education.